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## CRITICISM AND DOGMA.

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CRITICISM is a method of knowledge. Wherever there is any sphere of knowledge, Criticism has its place. Criticism is the test of the certainty of knowledge and the method of its verification. It is vain to suppose that Dogma can avoid Criticism any more than any other object of knowledge. If the dogma is true, Criticism will verify it and confirm it. Criticism is destructive only of that which is false. Truth and fact cannot be destroyed. They are imperishable. Criticism and Dogma are not antithetical. They have each their own spheres of activity. Criticism cannot take the place of Dogma, and Dogma cannot take the place of Criticism.

Criticism has several departments in accordance with the several departments of knowledge. These are Philosophical Criticism, Historical Criticism and Scientific Criticism. Each of these has its subdivisions. Biblical Criticism is a section of Historical Criticism, and embraces all kinds of Historical Criticism so far as these may be used within the limits of the Literature of the Bible. There is a great confusion in the public mind at present as regards Criticism and Dogma, because of a failure to discriminate between the different kinds of Criticism and their relation to Dogma. Much has been written upon Higher Criticism in recent years, and yet there is a general misunderstanding as to its meaning, its methods and as to the sphere of its operation. Higher Criticism is essentially Literary Criticism. It is named Higher in distinction from Lower Criticism. Lower Criticism of the Bible has to do with the text of the Bible, to verify and correct it so far as its letters, words, sentences, chapters, books and collections of books are concerned. It has nothing to do with the contents of the writings, except so far as

these may indirectly testify to the text. The Higher Criticism has to do with the higher task of verifying the literary forms of the writings, especially as to the four great problems: integrity, authenticity, literary features and credibility of the writings. These also are purely formal questions and do not concern the contents except indirectly. The contents are tested as to their historicity by Historical Criticism, as to their teachings by the discipline of Biblical Theology. All these varieties of Criticism verify and confirm the contents of the Bible and the forms in which these contents are contained. Any further Criticism goes beyond the realms of Biblical Criticism into the larger sphere of Philosophical Criticism, General Historical Criticism and Scientific Criticism. There are therefore two entirely distinct questions with reference to the relation of Dogma to Criticism: (1) its relation to Biblical Criticism; (2) its relation to other Criticism. After Biblical Criticism has accomplished its task of verification or destruction, then the other departments of Criticism have their work of verification or destruction also. The verification of Biblical Criticism is not sufficient for the final establishment of any dogma. The verification of Philosophical Criticism, General Historical Criticism and Scientific Criticism is necessary for the modern scholar, even if he be convinced that the authority of the Bible is infallible. These distinctions enable us to determine the real state of the question as to the relation between Criticism and Dogma, with regard to any dogma under discussion.

The burning questions of Dogma at present are the Virgin Birth and the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most people are greatly confused about them. These two questions are really only two parts of the same fundamental question as to the nature of the body of Christ, which also is at the base of that other important question as to the nature of the presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist. The solution of all these problems will probably come together. Christians ought not to be disturbed by the work of Criticism upon any one of them; for such work can only result in the verification and vindication of what is real and true in these dogmas, and the destruction only of what is unreal and false. We shall limit ourselves in this article to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, because this is the one most under discussion at present and the one most difficult of belief

by a large number of Christian people. The method and principles used in this discussion apply equally well to all other dogmas.

I. *Biblical Criticism and the Virgin Birth.*

(1) The Lower Criticism confirms the dogma of the Virgin Birth. That doctrine is contained in the Gospels of Matthew (I, 18-25) and Luke (I, 26-38). These passages are now and always have been in the texts of these Gospels, and there are no variations in codices or translations that in any particular impair their statements as to the Virgin Birth.

(2) The Higher Criticism also confirms the dogma. It is true that the dogma is not contained in the Gospel of Mark; but that Gospel begins the story of Jesus with His Baptism, and only briefly reports the ministry of John the Baptist prior to it. The author of this Gospel, however, represents Jesus as the Son of God, the Lord God of Isaiah XL, 3, heralded by John, the messenger of that prophecy. It did not come within the scope of the plan of this evangelist to state how the divine Son of God entered the world. The Gospel of John does not contain the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It tells of the entrance of the divine Word into the world by incarnation. It is absorbed in the nature of the Incarnation and does not give attention to its mode of birth. The silence of these Gospels cannot, therefore, be used as an argument against the doctrine. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, instead of stating the high doctrine of the Divinity of Christ and the Incarnation of the Eternal Logos, limit themselves to the Virgin Birth of Jesus, which is certainly a simpler doctrine according to ancient conceptions. It is said by some that Jesus is represented in the Gospels as the son of Joseph (John I, 45), and therefore could not have been virgin-born. But no such implication is in this statement. When Joseph took Mary to wife and recognized Jesus, the son of Mary, as his son (Matthew I, 24-25), Jesus certainly became the son of Joseph in legal and common uses of the term.

It used to be said by the older objectors to the Virgin Birth, and is still said by some at the present time, that the narratives of the infancy of Jesus were later additions to the Gospels; but this opinion has been destroyed by a deeper study, which shows that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke both depend upon earlier sources. They both used a writing of St. Matthew, the apostle,

known as the *Logia*, and a Gospel of Mark in a simpler form than the present Gospel. The story of the infancy of Jesus came from a third earlier source, the Gospel of Luke using more of it than the Gospel of Matthew. This earlier source was poetical in form. It may have been one or more poems. That question has not been finally settled. But it is evident that these Gospels simply give prose settings to this poetry. Matthew gives but one poetic extract, but Luke several in those canticles which have always been used in the worship of the Church. These snatches of poetry were evidently written originally in Hebrew and have all the features of Hebrew poetry, parallelism, lines measured by tonic beats, and strophical organization. They were translated into Greek by the authors of the Gospels. The work of the evangelists upon them was limited to translation and prose settings. The documentary authority is, therefore, in original anonymous sources, endorsed by the two independent Gospels that used them, Luke and Matthew.

These poetic extracts which give the doctrine of the Virgin Birth are early in their origin, among the earliest of the documents upon which the New Testament depends. They must have originated in the Palestinian community before the dispersion of the Christians prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, thus during the lifetime of James and Jude, the half-brothers of Christ, and on that account credible to as high a degree as any other document of the New Testament.

The piece cited by Matthew (I, 20-21) is:

“Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife:  
For that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit.  
And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus;  
For it is he that shall save his people from their sins.”

The piece cited by Luke (I, 35-37) is:

“The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee,  
And the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee:  
Wherefore also that holy thing that is to be born  
Shall be called the Son of God.”

The doctrine of the conception by the Holy Spirit and the birth from the Virgin is in a poetic form, but the substance of the doctrine is unmistakable. The form in which it is stated is in accordance with the ideas of the Jewish Christian community

of the time. The conception by the Spirit takes place in connection with a theophany. The description is in terms of theophany and in Hebraistic style. All this favors its credibility. Thus all the lines of the Higher Criticism favor the Virgin Birth.

(3) What has Historical Criticism to say about this dogma? Here we must distinguish between Biblical Historical Criticism and General Historical Criticism. The questions that may be raised are:

(a) The Genesis of the story. We have seen that its literary origin was in a poetic source, composed in the Palestinian community prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. It must have had the sanction of James and Jude of the family of Jesus, the heads of the Palestinian Church, otherwise it could not have been tolerated in the Christian community and could not have been regarded as authoritative by the authors of the Gospels. All these were too near the birth of Jesus, in temporal, geographical and personal relations, to go astray in so important a matter. The two pieces of poetry are entirely consistent, though in poems of different measure and in different language. In the one, the child is to be called Jesus; in the other, the Son of God. In the one, that which is begotten is of the Holy Spirit; in the other, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Virgin with the power of the Most High, and the result is a holy thing to be born. The conception by the Holy Spirit and birth from the Virgin are evident in both. The poems are put in the mouths of angels addressing Joseph and Mary themselves. The poems certainly do not give the exact words of these angels; but only the substance of their communication. This substance was either a conception of the poet, or was derived directly, or indirectly, from Joseph and Mary. But, in any case, the poet makes angels as well as Joseph and Mary witnesses to the reality of the Virgin Birth. It is difficult to see how any writer could have gone any nearer the sources for his material or have produced more reliable witnesses.

(b) The next question is as to the genuineness of the story. We may dismiss at once the suggestion of the older uncritical Deists and Rationalists, that it was meant to deceive as a forgery of lies. The only questions debatable are, whether it was a myth, legend, fiction or historical fact. There is a place in the Bible for all of these. They all have their use and purpose in

religious instruction. There are many legends and myths as to the childhood of Jesus in later Gospels of the Infancy. May the poetical story of the Virgin Birth be one of the earliest of these? Many of the older critics so supposed. But we cannot think of myth or legend, because these poems that contain the statements as to the Virgin Birth are too near the event, too close to the apostolic community, too near the family of Jesus, too near the Virgin herself, to admit of the growth of such a legend or myth, and of its acceptance by the family of our Lord and by the early Christian community. The only question that is debatable is whether the Virgin Birth rests upon the testimony of Joseph and Mary directly, or indirectly through the children of Joseph, James and Jude, or whether it originated in the family of Jesus after the death of Joseph and Mary as a pious conception, to explain the Incarnation to those who had come to the opinion that He was divine and preëxistent before His birth into the world. This is a question we have no means of answering.

(c) We must now confront the question of the reliability of the story of the Virgin Birth. If it rests upon the testimony of Joseph and Mary, they were the only primary human witnesses possible, and the very best witnesses. How could either Joseph or Mary be mistaken as to this matter? We must accept their testimony, or reject them as false witnesses. But, to reject their testimony, would be to impeach them so seriously that it disproves itself, because inconsistent with their character as attested by their own lives and that of Jesus, James and Jude, and the unquestioned esteem for them in the Apostolic Church. They might not be able to explain the fact of the Virgin Birth, they might have mistaken their own subjective illusions for angelic voices, but they must have known whether the Virgin Birth was a reality or not. If now we take the other alternative and suppose that the Virgin Birth is a poet's conception as to the mode of the Incarnation, originating from a pious opinion rather than from testimony, then we must admit that it rests upon the opinion of those best qualified to interpret the mode of the Incarnation, not only because they were nearest to the person and life of our Lord, knowing Him from birth until death, but also because they were guided by the divine Spirit to interpret and teach the doctrine of Jesus to their fellow men. If we accept the promises of Jesus as valid, and the preaching of the

apostles, the founders of Christianity, as reliable, we must accept their testimony even as to so extraordinary and unexampled an event.

(4) What then has Biblical Theology to say upon this question? The Virgin Birth is essentially a doctrine or dogma. It is a mode of birth in Incarnation, and indeed the only mode known to the New Testament or Christian Theology. It is quite true that, in all the many references to the Incarnation in the Epistles and the Gospel of St. John, there is no mention of the Virgin Birth, and nothing that involves it; and it is quite possible that St. Paul, when writing his Epistles, never thought of it. That, however, amounts to nothing more than this, that St. Paul was so deeply concerned with the preexistence of Christ, with His divinity, and with the saving purpose of the Incarnation that he did not concern himself with the mode of birth; or, if he did know the mode, did not regard that as important to the purposes he had in mind in writing his Epistles. The same may be said of the author of the writings attributed to St. John. On the other hand, there is no other mode of birth in Incarnation stated or suggested in any of the numerous references to the Incarnation in the New Testament; and nothing that is in any way inconsistent with the mode of Incarnation by Virgin Birth. If Jesus Christ is the incarnation of a preexisting divine person, then some mode of birth was necessary. There seems to be no alternative between the Virgin Birth and birth in the ordinary way of human generation. It is altogether improbable that any one in the first Christian century could have thought of the Incarnation in any other way than by Virgin Birth. Other religions remote from Christianity do not hesitate to attribute virgin birth to their founders. It was the common opinion in Biblical times that barren women may conceive by the power of God in answer to prayer. Nothing is more common in all the religions of the world than for women to pray to their gods that they may conceive, and to regard conception as an answer to their prayers. It would be difficult to show that any one in the time of Jesus would have thought it possible that God could be born of a woman by the ordinary method of human generation. If any one really thought of the mode of Incarnation, the only mode thinkable in the first Christian century was Virgin Birth. Ob-

jections to Virgin Birth in the interest of natural generation are very modern, due almost entirely to the exaggerations of modern Physical Science. The environment of thought in the apostolic age verifies the conception of the Virgin Birth.

Thus all the departments of Biblical Criticism, Textual Criticism, Higher Criticism, Historical Criticism and Biblical Theology verify and confirm the Virgin Birth as a dogmatic fact. Whoever accepts the authority of the Bible as final is compelled to accept the Virgin Birth as an Article of his Faith. There can be no question but that the authority of the Church was given to the Virgin Birth in the old Roman Creed not later than the middle of the second century, and that it has been an official article of all the great branches of the Christian Church until the present day. Whoever accepts the authority of the Church as final is obliged to accept the Virgin Birth as an Article of his Faith.

## II. *Other Criticism and the Virgin Birth.*

The modern mind is not content to accept any dogma on the testimony of the Bible, or on the testimony of the Church, or on the testimony of both combined. Every event and every dogma must be subjected to the test of general Historical Criticism, to Philosophy and to Science, and must submit to their verification or condemnation. Even the Christian who submits to the authority of the Bible and Church must submit his dogma to these tests of Criticism, if he would use it to convince and convert other men. He is the last one who should object to such tests. He should have such confidence in the authority to which he submits as to have no doubt of its verification in all matters and in all respects.

(1) General Historical Criticism does not recognize the authority of Bible and Church as final. It challenges the evidence itself. The testimony of an ancient document, however venerable and credible, is not altogether sufficient. It is necessary to consider whether the Virgin Birth is in accordance with the experience of mankind and therefore natural; or contrary to that experience and therefore unnatural or supernatural. It is admitted that the Virgin Birth is not in accord with the experience of mankind. It is contrary to human experience. It belongs to the realm of the supernatural. The Virgin Birth of the

heroes of all other religions is denied without hesitation by devout Christian scholars. Why, then, should the Virgin Birth of the Founder of Christianity be the only exception in the history of the world? The historic origin of Christianity may seem to justify the Virgin Birth, so far as the Gospels and the opinion of the Apostolic Church are concerned; but the historian is obliged to consider the environment of Christianity, the circumstances under which it arose, and the history of the great World of which Christianity is only a part; and of other religions, whose history has in many respects gone through the same historical process as Christianity itself. Such an event, if it be an event, lies outside the limits of historical Criticism, just as truly as do angels and all the phenomena of the spiritual and invisible world. History can take account of Jesus only so far as His life in this world is concerned.

But if Historical Criticism, on the one hand, is impotent to verify the Virgin Birth as a fact, on the other hand it is impotent to discredit the doctrine. If angels exist, if there is a spiritual world, if there are spiritual relations between mankind and that spiritual world, if an incarnation of a preexisting divine person was necessary to human salvation; even if unique and unexampled in History, the Virgin Birth may be beyond the domain of Historical Criticism, but it is not impossible in itself; and if angels exist as ministering spirits they may have made the annunciation to Joseph and Mary. General History, if it cannot verify the fact of the Virgin Birth, verifies the dogma as appearing in the most primitive Christian Creed, not later than the middle of the second century, as the unanimous consensus of the Christian Church in all its great historical organizations until the present time, as a dogma which has determined the history of Christian doctrine, and through Christian doctrine the Christian Church and Christian civilization for nineteen centuries. It is not possible to explain the history of the world without recognizing that there is a God in History, and that, to use the words of Lessing, "The History of the world is the divine education of the race." It is not possible to explain Christian History without the recognition of Christ in History, and if Christ, then what Christianity has always recognized Christ to be, the Incarnate Saviour, who by Virgin Birth identified Himself, once for all and forever, not

with an individual man, but with human nature, as the Head of redeemed humanity. These things are dogmas interpreting History, which cannot be verified by Historical Criticism as realities attested by the human senses and human experience; but, without them, Christian History is unintelligible, inexplicable, a mass of heterogeneous facts and events without harmony and without unity.

(2) Modern Physical Science cannot verify the Virgin Birth of our Lord, because such an event is contrary to the general law of human births. Science, thus far, knows of no exception and is unable to see how such an exception is within the realm of possibility with normal human beings. If our Lord entered this world by the Virgin Birth, it must have been in an abnormal way at present unverifiable by Science. Therefore, such a birth must be regarded as outside the limits of scientific investigation. Science in its development fortifies more and more the uniformity and immutability of the laws of nature. The laws of nature are the laws of God. Moderns shrink from thinking that God would violate His own laws even in the incarnation of the divine Son.

On the other hand, Science cannot say that the Virgin Birth of our Lord is impossible, because it may be a unique fact, justified by such a unique purpose as the Incarnation of the Son of God in order to the redemption of mankind. Science can only say that it is beyond the realm of Science and that it is in the realm of Dogma; and that the dogma must not be stated in any form that will contravene the laws of nature. Physical Science, notwithstanding its great achievements in recent years, is as truly enveloped in mysteries as is Christian Dogma. New discoveries are constantly verifying, or destroying, old theories. Physical Science is now face to face with a world beyond the reach of the human senses. It has been so shaken by recent investigations that it requires all its energies to reconstruct its own doctrines. It is at present in too unstable a position to give the law to Theology. Many things are now done every day, in accordance with laws now known, which in ancient times would have been regarded as miracles. Doubtless, there are other laws yet to be discovered of which Science knows nothing. If there is a God, Who governs all nature by law, He may use laws as yet unknown to accomplish His purposes. And who can say that there may

not be crises in the history of the world when the Creator and Governor of the Universe may act Himself directly, without the use of any law whatever. The Incarnation of the Son of God was from its very nature a unique event, the most unique that any one could conceive of. In this event, if in any, God might act directly in theophany, as the Gospels represent Him as acting. Unless we are prepared to exclude God from His Universe and deny to Him any immediate action in its interests, we must recognize that the Incarnation was an event in which He would act directly, if ever, for it is God Himself becoming man. This again is Dogma, back of Physical Science; but in no respects antagonistic with Scientific Criticism or inconsistent therewith. It is in a realm into which Physical Science cannot as yet enter and may never be able to enter.

(3) So far as I can see, Modern Philosophy has nothing against the Virgin Birth as such, unless it can be shown that such a birth impairs the nature of the man that is born, or his human descent, or his unity with the human race as such, or disturbs the order of the Universe. When, however, the Virgin Birth is considered in its consequences in connection with the doctrine of the human nature of Christ, Philosophy has much to say. In the dogma of the Incarnation, the preexisting Son of God became man. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the relation of the divine and human natures in the God-man. In the evolution of the doctrine of the Incarnation in early Christian Theology, it was made evident that the union of the pre-existent Son of God with humanity could not have taken place at any time after birth, whether at the baptism, the presentation in the temple, the birth itself, or at any other conceivable time. It must have been before birth and in the conception itself. It was also made evident that Jesus Christ must have been a complete and normal man, body and soul, His soul possessed of all its faculties, mind, affections and will.

The only thing in which His human nature differed from that of other men was in its union with the divine nature and the unity of the two natures in one person. Such a union of natures and such a unity in one person were unique and beyond the sphere of human knowledge or experience. The unity of the body and soul of a man is in the personality of the individual. Jesus was not only man, with body and soul, but also

before He became man He was a divine person with a divine nature. The divine person of the Son of God became man and, therefore, the divine personality became the unity of divinity and humanity in the God-man. The Son of God could not divest Himself of divine personality and become an individual man with a human personality. Being and remaining God, He must have remained a divine personality. He could not have assumed human personality with human nature without becoming two distinct beings, God and man, without becoming two and not one. In ancient as well as in modern times difficulty has been felt with regard to the absence of human personality from the man Christ Jesus. It seems to make his humanity incomplete. This difficulty was overcome by the doctrine that the human nature of Christ received its personality by union with the person of the Logos. What had to be excluded was that the human nature received its personality from its humanity. There could not be a duality of personalities in the God-man without making the union a merely objective one, chiefly if not entirely ethical. All this raises many difficult questions for Psychology and metaphysical and cosmic Philosophy, but none that have ever been regarded as insuperable by theologians, none that were not removed by the dogmatic statements of theologians more than a thousand years ago, when these questions were more hotly debated than at the present time. These doctrines were formed with a full use of the greatest systems of Philosophy that have ever appeared, the Platonic and the Aristotelian, and have maintained themselves through all the centuries to the present time. It is extremely improbable that they can be unsettled by that medley of heterogeneous and conflicting opinions that constitutes the Philosophy of our day. Philosophy is at present the most unsettled and unstable of all departments of human knowledge. It is in no position to give the law to a dogma which has Plato and Aristotle at its back.

The Philosophical difficulties which beset the doctrine of the Virgin Birth do not concern the Virgin Birth in particular, but the Incarnation in general. Indeed, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth seems to be the only way of overcoming the chief difficulties. If the preexistent Son of God became incarnate by ordinary generation, we could not escape the conclusion that a human individual person was begotten. The In-

carnation would then not be a real Incarnation, but an inhabitation of Jesus by the Son of God, with two distinct personalities, that of the preexistent Son of God and that of the begotten son of Joseph. Nestorianism could not be avoided. Such a merely external union of the divine Son with a human individual could not accomplish human salvation, as the Christian Church has always clearly seen. If the Son of God only inhabited the man Jesus, He might save that man, but how could He accomplish the salvation of the human race? Such an inhabitation of the Son of God would not differ in principle from the indwelling of the divine Spirit in a man. The man Jesus would be a prophet, a hero, a great exemplar, but not the Saviour of mankind. He might be the last and greatest of the heroes of Faith, but not God Incarnate. Only a God-man who had taken human nature into organic union with Himself and so identified Himself with the human race as to become the common man, the second Adam, the head of the race, could redeem the race. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth gives such a God-man. Natural generation could not possibly give us such a God-man. Therefore, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is essential to the integrity of the Incarnation, as the Incarnation is to the doctrine of Christ and Christian Salvation.

When it is said that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is essential, it is meant that it is essential to the system of doctrine and the Faith of the Christian Church. The Church can no more dispense with that doctrine than it can dispense with the Incarnation or Christ Himself. It is not, however, essential to the faith or Christian life of individuals. The doctrine may for various reasons be so difficult to them that they cannot honestly accept it. They may content themselves with the doctrine of the Incarnation and refuse to accept any doctrine as to its mode. They may even go so far as to deny the Virgin Birth, and hold to the theory of ordinary generation without accepting the legitimate consequences of that doctrine. Theologians are not always consequential. Men are responsible for what they believe and teach, not for what others think that they ought logically to believe and teach. The Church may, and in the present situation and circumstances of Christian Theology ought to, tolerate opinions which it cannot endorse.

Christian dogma is in a process of reconstruction, owing to

the partial adoption by theologians of the principle of development. Science and Philosophy are also in a condition of reconstruction and restatement. Confusion of thought is inevitable under these circumstances. The Church, the most stable of all human institutions, can afford to be patient and charitable, and to wait until its scholars have removed the difficulties that in this age envelop Christian Dogma. These can only be overcome in the arena of chivalric scholarship, not in ecclesiastical courts ruled by ecclesiastics, who are usually more concerned about the forms of things than about their reality. Christian scholars as a body are not at all dubious as to the Virgin Birth. It is not at all a question of Biblical Criticism, but of Christian Dogma. They are generously inclined towards those who at present are either doubtful about it, or even disposed to deny it. Biblical and historical scholars are just as decided in its maintenance as dogmatic theologians. For it is a dogma which is inextricably involved in the Christological principle that lies at the basis of Christian Dogma and Christian Institutions. They cannot possibly recognize that the birth of Christ was by ordinary human generation, for that would be a revival of the Nestorian heresy and be a denial of all the Christian Philosophy of the centuries, with all the serious consequences therein involved. It would turn back the dial of Christianity nearly two thousand years; it would break with Historical Christianity and its apostolic foundation, and imperil Christianity itself.

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